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Community leaders receive a tour of Camp Roberts



Photo by Anne Quinn

Paso Robles City Council member Jim Heggarty and Charles Morales, city councilman from Gilroy, take aim with M-16 rifles at a Camp Roberts Video Simulation Training facility on Friday.

Seconds after a small contingent of National Guard soldiers scrambled past a cluster of simple buildings shooting at unseen enemy, Iraq civilians emerged and went about their business, despite the proximity of an intense battle filling the air with smoke and puncturing the melody of Muslim prayer in the background with deafening gunfire.

That's a very typical situation and a very dangerous one, Colonel Keith Lochner, deputy training commander at Camp Roberts, told a group of officials touring Camp Roberts training facility on Friday.

"Iraqis are used to the fighting," said Col. Lochner. "It's a way of life for them. They come out, walk around, and it makes it harder for us

to distinguish the civilians from insurgents."

Col. Lochner was speaking to a group of community leaders who toured Camp Roberts on Friday. Camp Roberts is the third largest training facility in the United States, when its 43,000 acres are combined with Fort Hunter Liggett to the north.

On tour were Paso Robles City Council members Jim Heggarty and Gary Nemeth, City Manager Jim App, Assistant City Manager Meg Williamson, Emergency Services Chief Ken Johnson, Cliff Smith, legislative aide to District One Supervisor Harry Ovitt and Mike Whiteford, representing U.S. Congressman Bill Thomas. They joined others, such as Charles Morales, a city councilman from Gilroy, on the tour. Camp Roberts

sits in both San Luis Obispo and Monterey counties.

Camp Roberts pumps an estimated \$35 million a year into the local economy.

"We rely on this community," said Camp Roberts' commander, Col. John F Smith. "We use local vendors, our kids go to our schools, we have a vested interest in the community."

Yet, for obvious security reasons, the community knows little about what goes on there.

Camp Roberts officially began its mission as one of the world's largest training sites in March 1941. Its population has waned and waxed with American military commitments overseas. It was very active during the Korean War in the 1950s because its terrain so closely resembled that of Korea. It was busy dur-

ing the Vietnam War, yet officially closed in April 1970. In 1971, the California Army National Guard received control of the Camp under license from the Army to establish a Reserve Component training and mobilization facility, which is its role today.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, 12,846 soldiers have been trained at Camp Roberts. Of those, 7,190 were deployed overseas.

While many of its facilities are still World War II vintage, that's changing. WWII-era barracks are coming down or are getting refurbished. Soon there will be a new cell tower on site to improve communications. In addition, CAT Theater will be producing theatrical shows there, a throwback to the Camp's

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Photo by Anne Quinn

A soldier demonstrated the type of battle training that prepares California National Guard soldiers for Iraq at the Community Leaders Tour on Oct. 28.

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World War II hey-days when well-known celebrities such as Robert Mitchum and Red Skelton trained there and Lucille Ball and Marlene Dietrich visited to entertain.

Today Camp Roberts's key objectives are "quality training and mobilization support," according to Col. Smith.

It's earned a national reputation for its soldier readiness processing in addition to intensive training that gives soldiers an edge on the battlefield.

Soldiers leave Camp Roberts knowing that their families will be cared for, their medical and dental benefits are properly arranged and legal matters, such as wills, taken care of, said Maj. Staci Kato who leads a human resources team of 475 employees.

"We are the number one ROP site in the country," said Kato. "We can handle 175 soldiers per day."

The California National Guard's new adjutant general, Major General William H. Wade II said that this level of efficiency "pays tremendous dividends to us."

Camp Roberts is a "significant mobilization station," and by processing the new recruits properly the number of those who "fall out" is reduced.

"We have very few problems here," said Maj. Gen. Wade. "Troops

that go through here have the least number of rejects later. We fix the problems here because we will not let our National Guard members be mobilized, then be at the mercy of someone else."

Battle training at Camp Roberts is "theater specific," Col. Lochner said. Troops are trained to deal with minefields, vehicle inspections and urban warfare.

"Unlike the movies where you see two to three hours of fighting, most battles last 30 seconds-but they will be the most harrowing 30 seconds of one's life," he said.

Conditions differ in Iraq, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kuwait, Sinai and specific training scenarios are designed for each.

Freedom Fountain, a memorial dedicated to the nine soldiers trained at Camp Roberts who died overseas sits in middle of the 15-acre site-specific training facility. Of the nine who died there, three had written home specifically saying how much they appreciated the training at Camp Roberts," Col. Lochner said.

"We pray for peace but we have to train for war," he said.

Individual skills are honed in the nearby video training simulation center. Community leaders got a chance to try it themselves during a video shooting simulation. With M-16 assault rifles in hand, community leaders shot at imaginary enemies who assaulted them from huge video screens. Scores showed how many times they hit the target.



Photo by Anne Quinn

Meg Williamson, assistant city manager for the City of Paso Robles, takes the tank commander's seat in an M1A1 Abrams Tank during the Community Leaders Tour.

Scores also rate trainees on fratricide incidents, the number of times they mistakenly shoot soldiers wearing the same uniform.

"Fratricide is lower than it has ever been in the world because of this training," said trainer Clyde D. Parks.

Video training simulation is also cost effective. While it costs \$1,100 for one tank round, in the video simulation training room a round costs

approximately two cents.

Officials were also taken out for rides in the M1A1 Abrams tanks which one enlisted man called "the Cadillac" of tanks. It weighs 63 tons and its 1,500 horsepower turbine engine can accelerate from 0 to 20 miles-per-hour in 7 seconds. The dirt roads surrounding the Camp Roberts tank farm are filled with fine white sand to imitate field conditions.